

RESISTING PARADISE • Barbara Hammer

http://www.channel.creative-capital.org/project_256.html

Making the invisible visible is what compels the prolific avant-garde filmmaker and documentarian Barbara Hammer. "So much of my work is about trying to uncover hidden histories, the stories that aren't talked about or even recognized," says the New York-based artist. Her explorations have yielded singular results: daring, unorthodox works exhibiting a dizzying array of visual juxtapositions, colors, textures, and formats that provoke visceral sensations while pulling apart and reconfiguring cultural representations of lesbian history and sexuality and other marginalized narratives.

Resisting Paradise, Hammer's latest film, emerged from her experiences while an artist-in-residence at the Camargo Foundation in the small fishing village of Cassis in southern France. Following in the footsteps of Henri Matisse and Pierre Bonnard, Hammer, herself a former painter, was seeking to capture the splendor of the Mediterranean landscape. "I was looking at the work of several painters who had allowed light and color to infuse their paintings rather than form. I am a lyricist at heart, an abstract artist, and I wanted to explore film abstraction and pure color from the same vantage point as these painters," she explains. It was during her residency, however, that the war in Kosovo erupted, and Hammer found it "impossible to continue my modernist pursuit of beauty without ideology or critical observation."

Recasting her original idea for the project, the filmmaker immersed her poetic investigations within a political context, posing the question: "Can art exist during a time of political crisis and war?" The result is a 90-minute experimental documentary that juxtaposes the lives of painters Henri Matisse and Pierre Bonnard during World War II with those of several French Resistance fighters who were still alive. A luxuriant work, *Resisting Paradise* uses text from the artists' letters to each other as voiceover, as well as interviews with the now-elderly Resistance fighters. As the film delves into issues of artistic identity, the pleasure of looking, and political responsibility, Hammer also employs staccato rhythms of light and shadow and multiple formats, including digital video, 8mm, 9mm, and 16mm, glass negatives, found photographs, reverse painting, and archival footage. Much of the film was created using an optical printer. By manipulating the speed, color, and nap of the imagery frame by frame, Hammer presents history as an endless process of discovery and revision. Her insistence on avoiding a "hegemonic approach to film aesthetics" encourages spectators to act as their own archeologists, identifying and creating meaning out of the slivers of images and stories offered.

A respected member of the avant-garde and queer film communities for more than 30 years, Hammer has made over 80 films and videos. Her distinctive vision has led to a series of pioneering works, including the shorts *Dyketactics* (1974), a four-minute piece focused on sensuality and touch; *Women I Love* (1976), an examination of women's sexuality within the domestic sphere; and *Double Strength* (1978), a valorization of female power. Later pieces, such as *Pond and Waterfall* (1982) and *Optic Nerve* (1985), reflect her formal concerns and experimentation with film emulsion. Hammer's trilogy of documentaries, *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), *Tender Fictions* (1995), and *History Lessons* (2000) reimagine gay and lesbian history through inventive montages of clips, ranging from medical texts and early cinema to photography and found footage. It is "by

reappropriating and remaking lesbian and gay visual history out of the misrepresentations of the past," notes Hammer, "that the former oppressive collective memories of identity will become the power site of social change."

Hammer is philosophic when she discusses the difficulty of merging her love of experimental film with her political interests. "I am always torn. I start out with one foot leaping into the void of pure color that delights me, and then I'm brought up short by social issues that come to the fore," she remarks. "But I do think abstract imagery is political in the sense that it activates the audience to come up with their own meanings. Who is to say what is true? There are so many multiplicities of truth, of history."

LOVER OTHER http://www.barbarahammerfilms.com/lo_director.html

Lover Other continues my work on uncovering choices made by artists and Resisters during war (Matisse/Bonnard in *Resisting Paradise*, 2003 while at the same time challenging the traditional genre of documentary filmmaking.

With the new acceptance of documentary as both vital and entertaining and with box office receipts supporting commercial theatrical releases more and more there is still something missing. What? The emergence of daring work that resifts and questions the literal composition of homogenous "reality". There are new ways to tell stories and audiences are hungry for creative and fresh approaches.

As a completely free and independent film artist I accept the challenge to expand the genre into multi-faceted motions of truths always giving the viewer credit for intelligence and perception. I work with the material that I find and create to make the most innovative piece possible. As an artist I can't nor do I wish to follow a formula. Everything must be created new and each new subject given its own documentary performance, a film performance called forth by the found material itself.

When I was working on *Resisting Paradise*, my 2003 documentary that questions what artists do during a time of war and focus on artists and resisters of WWII who worked near Cassis, France, I tried to find a lesbian or gay man who was also a resister. As a lesbian filmmaker and as an artist, I wanted to find a lesbian resister. People told me that during the war one didn't think about sexual preference, but only about saving lives. I remembered coming across the photographs of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore at Hotel Sully in Paris in 1988, but since my film was centered on Cassis and the Mediterranean coast, I couldn't include them. However, I could focus on their artistic lives and heroic, incredible acts of creative resistance to the Nazi occupation of Jersey Isle during WWII in my next film, *LOVER OTHER*.

It has been a privilege to work with the archival photographs, writings and graphic illustrations of these two women. I have found making the film challenging. A story of two Surrealist artists should not be told in strictly linear fashion, as that style would destroy the aesthetics of Surrealism. But the film needs to be accessible to an audience or it wouldn't be seen. This has been both my struggle and delight during the two years of making *LOVER OTHER*.

Barbara Hammer